

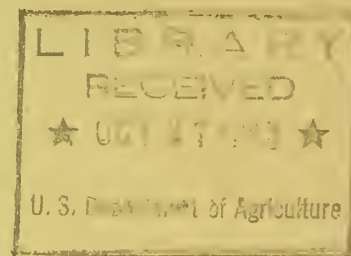
Historic, Archive Document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

1.9422
N 2 024
Oct 27, 1943
Cop. 1

WAR FOOD ADMINISTRATION

Food Distribution Administration
Washington 25, D. C.



THE FOOD WE WASTE

A Job for All of Us

A Statement by Robert T. Oliver, Assistant Chief, Food Conservation Division, for the 49th Annual Conference of the American Public Works Association, Hotel Sherman, Chicago, October 27, 1943

This statement owes its origin to a meeting several weeks ago with one of your members. When we told him our figures show that we Americans are throwing onto our garbage dumps 15 percent of all the food we buy for consumption in our homes, he found the figure pretty hard to believe. Then he examined the data on weight of garbage collected for his own city; and found it even higher than our estimate of the national average. He did two things, both of which were helpful. He arranged for a personal inspection of his own garbage disposal plant to see for ourselves the truckloads of good usable food that are thrown away; and he suggested a meeting with you men here to discuss the trend of food wastage as revealed in garbage collections in your own cities: to find how much it is, and whether it is increasing or decreasing.

When we put together facts collected by you Superintendents of Refuse Collection Departments, by Sanitary Engineers, by home economists and nutritionists, and by agricultural economists, we discover that we Americans are wasting somewhere along the line from farm to garbage dumps from 20 to 30 percent of all the food supplies produced in the country. One pound of food in every four that is grown is destined for the garbage dumps! Two hours in every eight worked by our farmer, food processors, and food distributors is time thrown away. Twenty-five acres of every hundred-acre farm are plowed, planted, cultivated, and harvested -- with the produce to be finally discarded as waste. No other country could afford to tolerate such a tremendous loss. This is a measure of our wealth, but in the dire period of world-famine we now face it is also a measure of our responsibility.

Can we continue to waste food enough to feed a population of thirty million people - a number equal to the combined population of hunger-ridden Belgium, Greece, Denmark, Norway, and Czechoslovakia? Can we afford, in terms of our own national war deficit, in terms of our own national conscience, or in terms of world opinion, to keep on wasting a quarter of the food we produce?

The key to the problem is the extent to which our national food wastage has become established as a normal process. It exists all along the line in practices which we never question because in our memories they have always existed.

On the farm some 2 percent of the crop is left unharvested in normal years; probably even more is left in the field during this war-period of labor shortage, machinery break-downs, and uncertainty of the price structure.

For the housewife as for the food distributor, the extent and significance of her food wastage are veiled from her by the fact that it is an established, normal process which has gone on for as long as she can remember. She has no standard of real frugality by which to judge the lavishness of her own food habits. She has not grown up, as Europeans have, with a stock pot in every kitchen to catch all the scraps and scrapings which we unquestioningly drop into the refuse pail. She has not been trained to take enough care in cooking to make intolerable any burning of the toast, or scorching of meat, or boiling over of stews.

The general American attitude toward food is well illustrated in a comment frequently heard: "We always try to set a good table." And the "good table," it should be noted, does not mean nutritionally sound meals. On the contrary, it means meals from which the most nutritious foods have been refined, and peeled and trimmed away: meals of white bread and polished rice and refined sugar -- with the food values largely discarded in the refining process; meals of white celery, blanched lettuce and beet roots, with the good outer and top leaves thrown away; meals of cabbage and asparagus and potatoes -- all trimmed and peeled of their most vitamin-rich parts; meals of meat shrunk by being cooked at too high a temperature, and with its fatty parts left to be trimmed away on the plates. This is the "good table" concept that keeps the amount of garbage pretty uniform, no matter from what part of town it is picked up.

Our communities need to be more conscious of what they are throwing away to be hauled to the city garbage dump or disposal plant. The sights, smells, and facts of garbage are not pleasant, but they should not be avoided for that reason. If spoiled food is not attractive, the best remedy is to spoil less of it. Food wastage is an issue we, as a nation, have dodged too long by ignoring it. Nothing will emphasize this fact so convincingly as a local survey of food waste in one's own community.

There is some evidence that the waste has declined since Pearl Harbor. But we know that the waste is still more than we can afford. The demand for food both at home and abroad is greater than we can meet despite the increases in production which our farmers have made for 7 successive years.

We should like to know more accurately than we do at present what part of the wastes have their source in the home; how much is from public eating places, how much from retail and wholesale houses. We should also have more studies on which to base our present conclusions with respect to the composition of food refuse. How much is meat? How much vegetables? How much fruit? How much bakery goods?

Finally we should have more precise data as to the portion of food refuse that is edible. (Our definition of edible would exclude such items as melon rinds, which are edible by hogs and are sometimes segregated for this purpose. It would include, however, such items as potato parings and beet tops, which, although largely discarded in American homes today, are known by the nutritionists to be as rich in food values as the part of the vegetable retained.)

In this measurement and analysis of food waste the Refuse Collection Departments of our cities have a vital role to play. It is our hope that you will accept responsibility for this role and make it a real contribution toward winning the war.

We of the Food Distribution Administration are asking communities all over the country to join in a program to reduce food waste. As your part of this job, we should like to ask of you three things:

1. To undertake the most practical and careful measurement of food waste as revealed in garbage collections that you can devise.
2. To cooperate with your local community organizations in combatting food waste by a concerted publicity drive to acquaint citizens with the facts.
3. To make available to the Food Distribution Administration the facts you unearth regarding food wastage, as a continuing guide in formulating further details of our national food conservation program.